

“Love God with your whole heart, mind, soul, and strength”

“Love your neighbor as yourself”

-- The Example of St Rita of Cascia --

If you ask someone about the first commandment or our Lord’s great summary of the commandments, they often say, and with great certainty: oh yes, I love the Lord above all else, yes, Jesus is certainly first with me. Then if you go a little further with the commandments, maybe the 3rd commandment, you might hear something like: well I have missed Mass on Sundays some but only when I had something important going on, like company or travelling. So in other words, there are things that you have put before God. The person wasn’t exactly lying when they answered yes, God is first, it’s just that they have a very big blind spot, they don’t really know what that means or entails. The case of missing Mass without a serious reason is a blatantly obvious example of putting other things – myself and my own inclinations and desires – before God. But we should not be too quick to conclude that my love of God is saintly just because I haven’t done that. Do I, for example, really do everything for the sake of the Lord? Are my intentions really that pure? Do I bear grudges, harbor hard feelings, climb up on the stump of self-righteousness, with no intention of ever putting these things aside? If so, there is no way I can claim to love the Lord when, in fact, I intentionally choose to be unlike Him.

Even people of generally good-will, though, will have some blindness in regard to what it means to really love (sacrifice myself for) the Lord and this blindness needs to be overcome in order to reach Heaven. There are many things that can help overcome it, the most important of which is sincere and frequent prayer. But examples of what it’s like are another, and indispensable, aid. We just don’t know what’s it like and a person of good will wants to know, wants to see some examples. This is what our Lord gives us with His saints. They provide the examples we need. One of these is St Rita of Cascia, whose memorial was this past Wednesday.

One of the spiritual works of mercy is: Bear wrongs patiently. It is, we could say, “part” of the virtue of charity (love of God, love of neighbor). It is, therefore, a disposition that a person *must* have to enter Heaven. There’s no getting around it, there’s no substituting something else for it, there’s no yeah, yeah, yeahing it away. It must at least begin in this life, I must choose it now, even if it has to be perfected in Purgatory. It is a fundamental disposition of our Lord, it is the way He is towards us, we have to imitate Him, there is no Heaven without it. What does it mean? What is it like? St Rita is a phenomenal example.

St. Rita was born in the city of Cascia (in central Italy) in the year 1381. She was named Margherita but she was always called Rita and today she is known only as St. Rita of Cascia. Bloody feuds between families were common in that area at that time; vendettas and vengeance, which are contrary to the very nature of God, were practically expected, especially if a family member was killed; it was the family’s “duty,” so went the popular mentality, to avenge their death. Rita’s parents, however, were the opposite; they were known for striving to reconcile warring factions. The effect of the parent on the goodness of the child should be noted. As a parent (or priest), are the faith, virtue, our Lord’s commands taken seriously so as to give a good example to the young ones and thus lead them to Heaven? Is that held to be of the highest importance? Or are such things brushed aside, perhaps with: oh Jesus loves everybody, period, end of story, forget it and move on to important things?

At a young age Rita had an attraction to the Augustinian Sisters, a cloistered, contemplative order, and she wanted to join them. But it was the custom of that time and place that parents more or less arrange the future of their children and her mom & dad arranged for her to be married and she conceded. Her husband, however, was a course man – unfaithful in marriage, brawling, and often insulting to Rita. She had two sons who showed the same disposition as their dad. Rita bore this with great patience, pleading with our Lord and offering her sufferings for their conversion. But let us emphasize *why* Rita pleaded with our Lord, or: what exactly was she pleading for. This is the most important thing about her, it is why she is a saint. She was not pleading because of her sufferings or asking our Lord to relieve them; she was afraid her husband was going to go to hell and she was pleading for his eternal life. Can you imagine doing the same? Rita pleads for the good of the very one who is treating her so badly. This is imitation of Christ. This is the characteristic of anyone who gets to

Heaven – a holy forgetfulness of self. Can you imagine a better, more loving wife or mother? Does my love of God and neighbor match hers? It doesn't even come close but her example inspires me to strive to do better.

Her husband did eventually enter into conversion. He came to realize what a sinful life he had led, how badly he had treated Rita and he repented, pleading with Rita to forgive him. And here Rita stands as a model of forgiveness. She had no care for any debt, she only rejoiced that her husband was now on the side of our Lord.

Although a changed man, Rita's husband had made many enemies and one of them killed him when he was still relatively young. Rita's sons were bent on vengeance. She tried desperately to dissuade them from it, holding before them the crucified Lord who took no vengeance. When they refused to listen, Rita begged our Lord to save their eternal souls, even to take their life if need be to keep them from committing homicide. Her sons did indeed both die from a serious illness. Rita was distraught over the death of her family. Notice here again the nature of a purified love. She's willing to suffer, really suffer – as anyone would – the death of her sons for the sake of their true good. I will suffer, she says, in order that they might not suffer eternally.

Rita then started to once again get an inkling for the convent. She approached the Augustinian sisters but they did not accept her. Apparently there were two concerns; first, as per their rule they only accepted women who had never been married, virginal women. But secondly there were apparently sisters already in the convent who were from the family that had killed her husband and the Superior was afraid that having Rita there would cause discord. So Rita went and reconciled the two families. Apparently this was such an extraordinary phenomenon that there was actually some sort of memorial placed in the parish church in Cascia commemorating this peace. The sisters were then apparently convinced to allow an exception to the rule of virginity and, at 36 years of age, Rita was accepted into the Order. The Lord can move hearts and minds if we trust in Him and follow Him.

Rita would spend the rest of her life, about 40 years, in this cloistered, contemplative convent. It is said that she spent much of her time praying for the repose of the souls of her husband and sons. About 15 years before her death, something extraordinary happened to her. St. Rita was praying before an image representing our Lord on Holy Saturday (lying in the tomb) and she became deeply aware of His interior and physical sufferings. She said to our Lord that she wanted to relieve them by sharing in them and her request was granted – she was given one thorn in her forehead from the crown of thorns; the wound remained open and visible until her death. A second extraordinary event occurred near the time of her death. A relative from close to her home came to visit. Rita was dying from a “wasting disease,” now believed to have been cancer. The woman wanted badly to do something for her so Rita asked her to bring her one rose from the garden at her home place. It was the dead of winter and there weren't any flowers. Still the woman went and found one rose in the snow-covered garden and brought it to Rita. After she died, her sanctity was already known by many. The man preparing her coffin was partially paralyzed from a stroke. He had a great admiration for Rita and after he had finished he looked at Rita's body and said: if I was well, I would have prepared a place more worthy of you. He was instantly healed and he did indeed make her a magnificent coffin. His coffin, though, never got used. People just kept coming to see her, grateful for her great influence in making peace in the area. She was never buried in that good man's coffin because her body remains largely incorrupt to this day, almost 600 years later, in the basilica in Cascia.

Suppose St Rita, a simple, humble, unassuming woman – whose love of our Lord and neighbor precluded any and all self-interest much less grudge bearing, hatred, and so on – had lived and died in our own time. Would her goodness be recognized today when such tremendous virtue is so often scoffed at, considered stupid, lacking in wisdom? Would people today be so struck by her virtue, so eager to exult it, that they would pay for a basilica in her honor? People of St Rita's time were sinners just like in any other time. Yet they could still recognize and acknowledge real virtue. Can we say the same? I cannot answer yes unless I intend to take her example seriously, with determination to imitate it. To do what Rita did, to be like her, is not natural, it is supernatural, which means it requires the grace of God, which He will graciously dispense. But it also requires our own effort as well, it requires a decision to do so on our part. Is this possible? With God's help, all things are possible. We cooperate with His grace by consciously choosing to develop this “mindset” and using Confession to help root out any vice contrary to it.

God bless you, Fr Kuhn.